

A Bag of Snakes

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Amos 5: 6-15, 18-24

Dan Berrigan said some years ago that trying to tell people about prison is like trying to hand them a bag of snakes. Nobody wants it, and it seems like a tacky thing to do to nice people—especially people you like. It's just simply no fun—we don't want to touch it or look into the bag.

That's probably true enough of the fifth chapter of Amos, too. The prophet's tirade against the people of Israel was as unwelcome as the raggedy shepherd himself in polite eight century society.

So why? Why bother with these unpleasanties? Why push it beyond what anybody is interested in hearing?

Why not leave the prophet on the shelf as an historic curiosity—a quaint word *from* the past, *in* the past, *about* the past?

Well, first of all because it's a living word for us now. And second, it's the finest methodology for political analysis I know. I believe it, and hope you believe it.

Amos has this basic assumption for prophetic social, economic, and political analysis: if you want to understand what is going on in any society, then go to court and see how the poor are treated. You will see in the court system, implies the prophet, more than you want to know.

Amos rants and raves about what he sees. It is corrupt. It is stacked against the poor. Then he delivers this zinger:

“And so,
keeping quiet in such evil times
is the smart thing to do!”

He follows with this image, which is so apt for our culture—an image of a day of darkness:

“It will be like a person who runs from
a lion and meets a bear.
Or like a person who goes home and puts
a hand on the wall, only to be
bitten by a snake.”

We have a choice, and it's clear. If *we* don't turn to God, says Amos, *God* will turn to us—like a fire, a fire that will burn everybody up.

Look, if you dare, at the court system—and see what happens to the poor. Look, if you can stand it, at the intent of our criminal control system—and what the message is for the poor. Look, if you can take what you will learn about the power of the laity from your church and mine: mainline church folks are generally the lawyers and judges and prosecutors and decision makers. Look at how the decisions that come from high benches and big offices crush the life and hope and human dignity of the poor, the women, the African American, the Hispanic, the Native American. Ah,

perhaps, keeping quiet in such evil times *is* the smart thing to do!

What will you see if you look into the courts; into the jails (we euphemistically call them “Detention Centers”); into the prisons (do we really believe they are “Correctional Institutions” or “Diagnostic and Classification Centers?”); what will you see if you look into the children’s prisons (what development occurs in “Youth Development Centers?”)? What will you see? Please stay with the question long enough to look, ask, listen, and get at least *some* of your information from sources other than judges and lawyers, and the mainline news media.

One thing you will see if you look into the criminal control system is a fact of absolute continuity in our history since the Civil War. Our prisons are racist from top to bottom. The criminal control system is one of the major factors in the fracturing of the African American family in this society. Over one-half of all prison and jail admissions in this country are nonwhite. One in four African American men aged 20-29 are under the criminal control system—either in prison, jail, or on probation or parole. Half of all African American men will be arrested at some point in their lifetime.

The facts are there. Please look. The criminal control system, including the death penalty, is the main unfinished agenda of the civil rights movement.

If you look, you will see that prisons are now the major government program for the poor in the United States. Prisons are our housing program for the poor. In the Reagan-Bush era, \$30 billion was cut from housing budgets, while, of course, the need has grown. Much of what little remained was squandered and stolen by high level bureaucrats. In the same era, 1980-1990, the prison population in the United States doubled, while the overall crime rate increased only 7%.

We now spend \$16 billion each year to lock up over one million Americans in prisons and jails. It would be like locking up the entire population of San Francisco or Cleveland. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 426 per 100,000. That is way ahead of South Africa’s 333 per 100,000, not to mention the Netherlands’ 40 per 100,000! In the 1980’s we even passed the Soviet Union.

Prisons are our only remaining social program for the poor. Prisons are our dumping ground. A local reality that reflects what’s going on in the rest of the United States can be found in the Los Angeles County Jail, which houses 3,600 people who are seriously mentally ill. In that one jail there are more mental patients than the total number of patients in all of California’s four state hospitals. As we have increasingly cut health and social services, jails and prisons and, yes, death row have become our dumping ground for the mentally ill and the retarded.

Lois, a woman I know who is the mother of a man on death row, says:

My son, who is a chronic schizophrenic, was turned out of a mental hospital because our health insurance ran out. They knew he wasn’t well but the money was gone so his treatment was over. His condition got worse and he killed someone. Now the state is spending \$4 million trying to kill him. There’s all this money to kill him but there was none to help him. What kind of sense does that make?

Prisons are taking everything there is. During the last three years, the people of Georgia spent \$350 million for new prison construction, while we cut programs and fired state workers and couldn’t adequately fund our schools. Last year’s presidential budget slashed \$100 million from public libraries, another \$800 million from low

income housing and rent subsidies, while asking for one-quarter billion dollars more to build more new prisons. We are literally trading housing for families and textbooks in our schools for more and more and more prisons.

Given all this growth, prisons have become, after war, the number two industry in the United States. An entire industrial structure is growing up around them, including professional advantage and opportunity for architects, academics, food service vendors, social workers, weapons companies, security equipment companies, health care firms, corrections bureaucrats, psychologists, psychiatrists, construction companies, fence corporations, engineers, and on and on and on. This is to say we are undergoing radical shifts in our economy to build in a long-term dependence on human bondage to keep the wheels turning.

The prophets are right: To understand who we are as a people, and what is going on among us, we have to look at what happens to poor people in the courts. We have to look at prisons. And then we need to ask, "Why?"

We are going through massive changes in the social, cultural, political, and economic landscape of the United States—and it's being done without our acknowledging what we're doing. Why?

On the local level people are increasingly tired of, and frustrated by, the ongoing and growing presence of the poor. And so we use police and jails to sweep the poor out of our sight, never bothering to ask, of course, what happens to the least of these after they're swept from our neighborhoods. Sanctuary is shrinking and our private and public policy is increasingly hateful toward the poor.

Underneath the numbers, of course, is a well of human suffering and social disintegration that is simply beyond description: hundreds of thousands of shattered lives and hopes, broken families, and broken dreams. And built shakily on top of it, is the privilege of a shrinking number of people. Ah yes, perhaps keeping quiet in such evil times *is* the smart thing to do.

But there is no need for us to be afraid of facing this because we have the rich resources of a biblical faith and a great cloud of witnesses that would look familiar to any Georgia prison warden: Jesus, the prisoner—sentenced to death as a common criminal; Rahab the hooker; Mary Magdalene the psychotic; Jacob the thief; Moses the murderer; David the murderer; Saul the murderer.

Don't you think God must sometimes chuckle? All these stories from scripture and we still don't get the point! God loves to come to the most broken, the most wasted, those least likely to be fixed or rehabilitated or "mainstreamed," and say, "You!"

You! Tell Pharaoh to let my people go!

You! Find the Risen Christ at the empty tomb and run, tell the others, proclaim the Resurrection!

You! Plant my church. Go to the ends of the earth!

We have the story! We know it!

We just forget that it has anything in the world to do with the culture and politics of today. And so the story sits on a shelf and shrivels for lack of vitality.

The prophet is clear enough about the stakes here. If we don't turn to God—if we don't plumb the resources of our biblical faith to sort through the political baloney that misleads everybody and continually sacrifices the poor for our corporate lack of imagination—then Yahweh will come like a fire....And friend, will it burn!

The fire is already burning. We've denied it; we've been quiet; we politely pretend it's not there, or that it won't touch us, but it's burning.

We're running from a lion—straight into the jaws of a bear. We've been zealous, even frantic to keep our neighborhoods safe, and now in the safe sanctuary of our home we put our hands on the wall and are bitten by a snake.

So are the consequences of a corporate life based on greed and fear: based on a willingness to keep quiet and to give our silent consent as the poor go down the tubes and pretend it has nothing to do with any of the rest of us.

Keeping quiet in such evil times is the smart thing to do!

Why is it smart for you and me?

Why does it make so much professional sense for us to turn our heads from the reality of prisons in our midst? Why do the people you and I know not talk about it? Why is it impolite for you to begin to ask questions about Episcopalians and Catholics and Presbyterians in the court system of your county—or whatever county? What *is* in this bag of snakes anyway?

It's your question. It's my question. It's our question.

Why?